

**Conference Report on 'Women Religious and the Political World'**  
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The seventh annual H-WRBI Conference, 'Women Religious and the Political World', took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of August in the beautiful surrounds of the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway. This year's conference was organised by Dr. Marie-Louise Coolahan with the support of others from the group. The temporal and thematic variety of this year's programme was astounding and the tradition of lively conversation and exchange was continued with interesting discussions following every panel. The diverse group of delegates allowed for a number of differing perspectives and illuminated a wide range of issues. With a variety of scholars hailing from Britain, Ireland, Europe, Canada and the United States, as well as archivists and women religious from a variety of religious institutes and backgrounds, this year's conference continued the practice of combining an interest in the past with a deep reflection on the reality of the present.

The highlight of the first day was unquestionably the launch of two books which will undoubtedly become pivotal works in their respective areas. Dr. Caroline Bowden had the pleasure of speaking first on the groundbreaking work of Dr. Margaret MacCurtain. Dr. Bowden noted that Dr. MacCurtain's new book *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History*, a collection of important essays, is an example of how much one person can achieve in their lifetime. Dr. MacCurtain has been both inspirational and highly influential on the scholars who have read and followed her research and her presence at the conference was greatly appreciated by all those in attendance. Dr. Bowden also launched Dr. Carmen Mangion's new book, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales* at this year's conference.

The first day of the conference also saw the presentation of a fascinating body of work focused on the role of women religious as nurses during the Crimean War. Mary Ellen Doona's paper opened the conference; entitled 'Care and Controversy: The "Crimean Brigade" of Irish Sisters of Mercy,' Professor Doona's paper explored the role the sisters played in female military nursing pointing to the interesting relationship which developed between Florence Nightingale and the Irish sisters whose help was not readily accepted. Discussion on the women religious during the Crimean War continued with Moira Egan's fascinating paper on the political world of the British nurses in the Crimea as well as the intersection of gender, class and religion in the British Military Hospitals. Finally Kate Harper's paper discussed the experiences of Frances Taylor as recorded in her important text *Eastern Hospitals and English Nurses*. These papers sparked much lively discussion amongst the delegates who examined the varied perceptions of Florence Nightingale and the reasons for her appearance as two starkly contrasting personalities.

The second day of the conference proved to be as stimulating as the first with papers spanning the tenth to the twentieth century. Anselm Nye presented a particularly insightful and revealing paper entitled "'About the washing..." The Great Strike of 1930'. Mr Nye's paper explored the action taken by a group of sisters whose burden became far too great when working as domestic managers within a seminary. This paper was well received by all of the delegates sparking interesting conversation amongst the present sisters on the difficulties faced by those in similar situations noting the bravery of the sisters who withdrew their services. Within the same panel Dr. Caroline Bowden gave a presentation on a project exploring the membership of the 'English Convents in Exile (1600-1800)' for which substantial funding has been secured from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. This project will gather and provide a wealth of information on the membership and supporting networks of these convents by surveying all of the surviving documents in public and private archives in England, Europe and the USA. The second day of the conference also provided a welcome journey to the middle ages where Dr. Kim Curran, Casey Beaumont and Anne Boyd discussed the women religious of Medieval Britain and Europe. Anne Boyd's paper in particular offered a colourful presentation on the importance and relevance of some fifteenth-century images of Catherine of Sienna.

It was announced that the eighth annual conference will be held on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2009 at the Bar Convent in York, England and will also mark the 400 year anniversary of Mary Ward founding her pioneering order. This year's conference showcased the importance, and relevance, of the continued research in the history of women religious and we can be satisfied that next year's conference will continue this tradition.